

INEBRIATE AUTOMATISM.

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IN 1879 I published a paper based on a clinical study of cases under my observation, in which it was shown that total blanks of memory and consciousness were not infrequent in inebriety, and that the inebriate in this condition went about as usual, giving little or no evidence of this state. He was literally an automaton, going about like a somnabulist, without conscious realization of events and surroundings.

This paper excited no attention, other than to bring out the records of many similar cases occurring under the observation of physicians and lawyers.

Through Dr. Motet of Paris I learned that this condition had been observed in alcoholic cases, but had never been the subject of special study before. This physician presented some medico-legal considerations of this subject at the International Congress of 1881, resulting in a very interesting discussion. In 1881, before the Medico-Legal Society, I gave the result of further studies and conclusions on this subject under the title of "The Trance State in Inebriety: Its Medico-Legal Relations." This was published with an introduction by the late Dr. Beard, and, with the paper of 1879, was without doubt the first medical study of the subject. This paper has received the usual

sneers and praise incident to every new phase of mental disease that is presented, and has most unexpectedly put into my hands the records of a large number of similar cases, which have come under the notice of physicians and been brought out in court. Most of these cases are not available for accurate study, as they merely point out some of the phenomena of this inebriate automatism, leaving all the other history a blank. From these and personal studies which I have made, the following facts may be stated as authoritative and correct :

1. That inebriate automatism is not an unusual phenomena in inebriety ; that it is noted by loss of consciousness memory of surroundings, and passing events, and the apparent full realization of a normal state, lasting from a few moments to several days.

2. This condition points to some profound disturbance of the higher brain centers, and of necessity is associated with impaired and lessened responsibility. Hence its practical importance in medico-legal circles.

3. In all cases it is found associated with a particular neurotic state induced or developed by alcohol, or existing before, and roused into activity by alcohol and other causes unknown. Inebriate automatism is distinct from a similar phenomena common to epilepsy and hysteria, and is without doubt a special and particular form of brain disease. Its pathology, as suggested by Dr. Beard, is most likely a cerebral exhaustion followed by a lowering of the consciousness below the plane of rememberabiliy, or a suspension of nervous activity in certain directions, closely allied to paralysis of particular brain functions.

The whole subject is, of course, unknown beyond a few landmarks, and my purpose is to give some farther views of this mysterious phase of psychical and physiological disorder. All that can be done is to group and describe some

of the courser phenomena apparent in the automatic state, and give some examples which will afford glimpses of the wide unknown realms awaiting discovery.

The first general fact apparent from a grouping of the symptoms of inebriates in this automatic blank state, *is that a large number are found to follow an accustomed line of action. That is, during this automatic blank they act and talk in the usual manner, and do things which they are in the habit of doing day after day.*

Thus an inebriate farmer would, at certain times, have blanks of from one to four days, during which he would go on with his work as usual. He could never recall any circumstance or event connected with his work, any process of reasoning by which he changed from ploughing a field to drawing of the stones from it. An organist during the paroxysm of periodical drinking, would play an elaborate church service, and except a slight trembling and unsteadiness in the voluntaries, seem no different to his associates, and yet be totally oblivious of all the surroundings, and have not the slightest memory of it after. This man on one occasion while playing a funeral service called the leader, and declared that he would have to play "Yankee Doodle" unless some spirits were given him. A glass was procured and he went on steadily. He never knew or could remember this occasion. A travelling salesman, of years' of experience and active work, would go over a route of customers extending over one hundred miles, and be gone three or four days, and never be able to tell or recall a single incident. The only history he had would be from his order-book and record of expenses. He would be drinking all the time, and yet seem fully conscious of every surrounding, acting in no way different, but memory made no record of passing events. In another instance an inebriate sea captain, who was always sober at

sea and drank hard on shore, would have an automatic blank lasting for one or two days at the point of sailing. He would recover consciousness a day after sailing and have no conception of any events at the time of going to sea. At this period he would show his usual judgment, attend to all the business, and appear sober and conscious of everything. To his associates he would use his note-book more freely, putting down every little event and fact, and not trusting to his memory. This blank would begin after a period of general drinking, and last one, two, or three days, or until he had stopped for twenty-four hours. Many of these cases, where the blank lasted any length of time, occurred in persons who were pursuing an exhaustive and monotonous work. *Another class of these inebriat-automatons are noted in which the line of conduct during this state was unusual and outside the ordinary events.*

Examples of this class may be mentioned. An inebriate farmer retiring and unambitious, suddenly entered upon a scheme of wild speculation, which he could not recall after. He bargained for a hotel, on one occasion, bought a share of a steamboat on another, and a race-horse on a third. To his friends he was unchanged except manifesting a great enthusiasm for wealth, which came on unexpectedly and disappeared in a mysterious way. He could not recall or remember a single event of these states. A banker who drank at long intervals at home, suddenly became a tract distributor in the lower part of the city, at a time when his services were demanded in his business. He would recover on the street and be confused to know how he came in that state; never having the slightest recollection of his condition. A lawyer, when drinking, will visit the theater or revival meetings, (if one be in the neighborhood) and be boisterous in his applause, or sympathy, never seeming intoxicated or oblivious to the proprieties of the time and

place, and yet he can not recall these events. I have noted a number of cases, where inebriates in this state joined societies or churches, and entered upon a course of conduct entirely foreign to all past experience. In some cases it was the outburst of some latent impulse or ambition, which had been smouldering in the brain,—in others it was traced to some thought that came from the surroundings, and in all instances the person was unable to explain it in any other terms except that he was “either drunk or crazy.”

Another group of this class are very prominent in courts, noted by the impulse from criminal acts, generally a low type, against both person and property. They act automatically and unconsciously, and this can be well attested in many instances, particularly where the acts were without motive or purpose, and foreign to all their previous conduct. Many of these cases commit assault, steal, forge names, and do various dishonest acts, of which they have not the slightest recollection, and the circumstances confirm this statement. They generally occur in chronic cases, who live in neglect of ordinary hygienic rules, and of course are more debilitated. Such cases come into court on grave charges, and although they protest ignorance are punished. The consciousness of innocence of motive, and injustice of punishment, precipitate them into a degree of recklessness that rapidly brings on a recurrence of this state. This was illustrated in a recent case of a man of standing who, in this automatic state, assaulted his wife. The knowledge of this plunged him into remorse and suicide. In another case a man in this state punished his child severely, and next day when he realized what he had done, drowned himself.

A large class seen in courts are congenital neurotic inebriates, and automatism in thought and action is common. Often in this state they develop impulses that have been under subjection before in their conscious moments.

Bad men discover this condition, and by causing the man to drink, may stimulate and direct this automatism to the perpetration of crime, which could not be accomplished otherwise. In many cases this is the fact, confirmed by the absence of efforts to conceal the crime or evert punishment, and unconsciousness of having done any thing wrong. The defense of no memory or recollection of the event is often a psychological fact. Strange and startling crimes committed by inebriates should always be the subject of careful inquiry, for, in many instances, this automatic state can be found.

Another group are noted, in which this automatic state precedes the period of excessive drinking. Like the aura preceding an attack of epilepsy, with this difference that the inebriate blank comes on early in the paroxysm of drink, and seems to be provoked by the moderate early use of spirits, then disappears, not returning again. They occur in periodical cases. An inebriate after a long period of abstinence, will suffer from some functional nerve trouble, be very irritable, and show great emotional disturbance. He may be suicidal, or almost delirious in his hope for the present and future. Then he will begin to drink and become slightly intoxicated, later he will fall into this trance state, and go about for an uncertain interval, then recover and enter upon a severe paroxysm, during which memory is clear, and consciousness of all passing events is undimmed, except when profoundly narcotized by alcohol.

Automatism comes on early and is very marked, and the patient is always active during this state ; chiefly in efforts to stop drinking. He will call on clergymen, for prayer, find temperance men, sign the pledge, and if he can get an opportunity to speak is often very eloquent ; when this passes off he enters freely upon a course of prolonged excess. He will have no memory of what he did after beginning to

drink for a few days or less time, then he will wake up with a feeling of abject despair and hopelessness, and give way to the drink impulse without restraint. A gentleman of wealth who is a periodical inebriate will begin at long intervals to drink wine. In a few days he will fall into a state of gloom and dread of death, make all arrangements for dying, and reason clearly, and be very sensible, then wake up, and be astonished at what he has done. After this he drinks freely but is always clear, and his memory is good of where he goes and what is done.

In a case under treatment those blank states were marked by kleptomaniac impulses which are without all ordinary reason or object, then they cease suddenly, and the most rigid honesty and respect for the rights of others follow.

In these groups, the inebriate is a mere automaton in motion, moving along certain fixed lines of action, or acting in obedience to some unknown forces, which not only develop new thoughts and deeds, but criminal impulses and acts foreign to all past conduct. He is at the mercy of unknown forces, which may change or vary any moment. Some governing center has suspended, and all consciousness of time and the relation of events has stopped.

Possible-changing thoughts and impulses, the influence of a disturbed organ, or the impression of a thought or desire coming from the past, may suddenly concentrate into action irrespective of consequences. Both subjective and objective states, influenced by conditions of health and brain power, may develop into deeds that are unknown and unrecorded by the higher brain centers.

This phenomena of automatism seems to have changed in many cases, becoming more prolonged and apparent as the inebriate becomes weaker. In one case under observation for four years, this blank state is now characterized by

great reticence and retirement, while formerly in this condition extreme activity was manifested.

In another case, sent to prison for life for manslaughter committed during this period, the blanks continued for many months at intervals, and then gradually died away. In two cases the patients recovered from inebriety, and the blanks disappeared.

Unfortunately, much of my clinical data give no information except on the conduct during this automatic state. No observations have been made on an earlier stage, and most of the cases sent to me are accounts of unusual acts, and the general proof that they were performed unconsciously.

In the study of cases under my personal care, the history of many short automatic periods appear, some of which clear up and are memorable after a time, but others are total eclipses. The conduct of many during this state is markedly insane, in others it is sane, and cannot be distinguished for any sign of failure.

Most of the cases I have published have been selected for their strong, startling features, and have been presented as types of a large class not so far on the road to extreme chronic states. I think that a large number of inebriates suffer from this blank automatism more or less, and as it rarely comes under medical observation, is more or less obscure. Intelligent inebriates conceal this state from their friends, from various motives, and unless some peculiar circumstances occur, it is unknown.

Recently a noted man disappeared, to the great distress of his friends, and he recovered consciousness three days out on an European steamer. He returned the next steamer, but could not account for or explain this action. He was a secret inebriate, and in an automatic state took passage for Europe.

When inebriety is fully studied from the standpoint of

science, this psychological phase of disease will be fully recognized, both in the court-room and at the bedside, and practical measures taken to remedy and prevent its recurrence.